

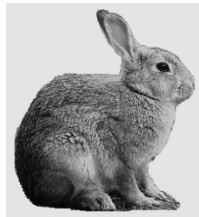
The Sea Path

**Ciarán
O'Rourke**

Smithereens Press

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Ciarán O'Rourke



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smithereens.press@gmail.com

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The Sea Path

Fresh Air

(Winslow Homer, 1878)

The wind grows new forever
on this hill-top, as I watch
the leaves swim backwards
in their cave-deep daub
of cloud behind you, loving
how the soar of sun you stand in
perfects the bright dial
of your shoe-buckles, and spills
into the lapse your hands inhabit
quietly as shells. The greatest
loveliness might be now,
though, when I see slowly
this sudden freshness has heaved
through everything the portrait
pictures, except your gaze
– you are here and elsewhere
in the same escaping breath.
Or else imagining then, after,
that perhaps you wake to it
when the picture finishes,
this ordinary thought you hold,
which the painter wondered
into sunlit nearness, so
you are real and remote
in the way that gull-shape is,
lingering high above
your dreaming head,
flung to the world
in a veer of blue.

For a Garden Slug

The
long
vowel
the grass
makes
of your body
takes the shape
of music in our eyes
as you pull away
from sudden
sun-pools your
fluent love of
stone and grass,
your liquid purr
and fingering of

the green blades
becoming the words
a cello might
have known
before the touch
of human hands,
as you move, one
perfecting limb,
to form verbs
of petal-hush
and the dull mud,
as if to render
visible in this space
a whisper of

the quiet,
quavered
shadow-light
you speak,
mouthing
in the slow
passage
of your trail
the soft truths
which slugs
can sing:

here is

m m

y y

b s

o o

d n

y g

Martello

Sun out
on the sea path
and a grey wave rising
in my chest
as I wade with you
into an April tide,
watching two terns
dangle the breeze
before their one
pure, spearing dive
through water,
which I miss in my
less elegant attempt,
rushing the element
in a sudden gulp
of need, and thinking,
as my body learns
itself again
in the tidal seep
of ice through limbs,
that you and I
were made for this
old beat of want
the sea imprints each year
on sandy minds,
that a bare-backed,
part-painful ritual like this
can be as clear
as water, and is best,
knowing the heavy

ocean-pull of life
to be both now
and here, in the fish-quick
dart and dip
of our own two hearts,
human still,
and swimming
into Spring.

Sea Stones

Why try trace
a footprint in the breeze

this way, an echo
furled in dust and air?

The broken shore
was ours alone,

leaning in
to one another

as the water whispered
and the starlight fell.

~

Fresh from the sea,
cicadas singing
in our heads,

we surveyed the kingdom
we had climbed away from,

the vineyards lush
with martyrs' blood,

Charlemagne's dream
of earth-lit oceans

rising round us
in the summer heat.

~

Higher still,
a flock of sea-birds

dragged its net
across the sun, omen

of a sky all swelt
with foreign rains,

which soon
moved in,

the dark air
trembling

with an eye-
blue light.

~

My sight strung
to the kite
of your back,

long and lovely
and supple with
spindrift, the seas

breaking across my
feet, and you
in the turn

and sway of
it all, spooling
me close, through

the burning wind.

~

Days after you go,
a storm invades
the midnight air:

shruggle of thunder
on the shore-line, sea-stones
rattling the pane.

Pausing to write you
a note of it, I find

a small bird
still hurtles
in its cage,

bullows its wings
against my heart.

~

The sun's empire
will be safe forever
on this frontier

of red rooftiles
and olive walls,
these rooms

to which
we may return
sometime,

to grow old
at last
in the long nights.

Guatemala, 1967

(Otto René Castillo, 1936-1967)

Say nation,
and the deer and moon
unlatch a shadow;

the darkness
quicken;
a candle blows.

Say water,
and thirst assumes
a human shape:

the man
whose mouth
defied the desert,

whose lips
the owners of the rain
would govern,

whose throat
the street-patrolling
prison-guards would smash.

Say pain,
and the concrete
barracks' walls

are politic with light:
in the blood-loud night
the shutters glisten,

the darkened windows
flash and gleam;
next door, nearby,

across the world,
a thousand silences conspire
to regulate the scream.

Say beauty,
and perhaps, my love,
I'll find your form again,

my tongue journeying
the valleys, my fingers
rivering the slopes,

in search of quietness,
of storms,
and the real dawn

always gaining,
to burn the blue half-
sleep of it to air.

Or perhaps it's you
I'll see, my country,
with a hope grown vivid

at the edge of vision:
in the slum, in the mud,
on the stricken hills,

in the book of laughter,
in the nameless streets,
in the fists

of language lifting
with the stars and sun,
in the flickered flame.

Say poetry,
and the voices
of the sick

might rise tomorrow,
the faces of the earth
might smile.

Still Life of Peaches and Figs

(Paul Cézanne, 1890)

This time
I'm sending peaches,
and a summer's sun
that dawdles in
on last year's kitchen
where the plates
are never empty.

Pure vowels
of the unperfected
morning, they are
lain or left out
in whatever
slow tumble
of fruit-fall
they fell from,
casual as rain.

And figs! Echo-
shaped, but so sure
in their small
altering of light,
they remake
the room entirely.

Oh, love, I know:
all of this you've heard
before, and words
are neither round nor heavy

in the way fruit is,
nor soft enough
to satisfy the mouth
or fill the aching palm.

Only, it was not the fruit
of poems that I was sending,
but another easy, breathing,
blemishable thing.

The thought, perhaps,
which if I wished enough
would sail through years
of oceanic air
unchanged,

or need of mine,
which might rain through
a sea-bright room
as stirred to life
as this one is,
to fall, by some half-
miracle of love
or hunger,
whole at last
into your open hands.

Man Kneeling in Grass

(Francis Bacon, 1952)

It must be good
to fall like this
in some dark space
of the mind, and find
your body feeling, after all,
the total metaphor
of rushes and earth
grow to softness
across your knees
and rise, furring your arms
to the elbow
with the swish and smell
of meadow-grass
and elemental ground.
Or perhaps
the swilling wish persists,
in this rectangular
corridor of night
I catch you in,
to sink through earth
and ache forever
in the well-deep nightmare
there, like stone.
Such grief, I think, could
only animate my own
small weight of need
in watching you: to send
the breeze of light
already trickling

through your scene
to flood the grass
and lift your mud-grey torso
from its shell.
I might hear you then,
brother, if you whispered
from your half-
factual meadow-room,
that it is good
to have knelt
your body in the grass
like this, and grown
as actual in learning it
as darkness was,
as real and human
in the midnight hour
as any absence is.

Hospice

What poem
or prayer is there
to call this animal to heel,

that webs your body so,
and skulks
in every whrum of blood,

ready to feast
when you speak, or rise,
or raise an arm,

and what
bone-dull element
is Need to us, who cannot alter

or undo
the rock-dumb motion
of this room,

which sways
to keep you
from the waking world:

the rigid chair, the rolling
desk, this week's flowers,
and the water-glass.

Against the ugliness
your walls contrive,
these things grow still,

till all that's left
is the window
opposite your seat,

to which
the bleak rain beats,
and the wetting wind.

So think beyond,
to the sounds of home
and the carried sun,

to the high morning
begun again,
the water rustling

and the rain
still green –
to walk out

in summertime, a furl
of swallows lifting,
and the Barr Road bare.

We lean in, close
as breath to you,
and whisper news,

as if to make
grief ripple,
life break through,

to see you sit
without contagion,
your hands at ease,

or leave entirely,
your shadow flying
from the sickbed sheets,

like a sun-
set suddenness
seeping the sedge,

the corncrake
croaking love tomorrow
at the island's edge.

Burying Turnus

(Juturna speaking, his sister; Virgil's Aeneid, Book XII, ll.872-884)

Could I slow the sun, retain
the heat of seconds in the air,
let shadows tremble

round the dial, by art,
or skill, or barely human need,
to hold you here, my brother,

far from the gnash
of falling wings, from Death
the monster, and his calling lair,

to hold you back, brother,
from the gap you enter,
this darkness you've become – but how?

And how could a sister,
a nymph like me, a grieving girl,
a soul to flowing mosses

and to floods, how can I,
immortal as the rain, as swept
and washed with loss of you,

how will I beat the earth
to ease your limbs,
how heal the stillness

that you've sunk into:
the blood-shut eyes, the un-
responding mouth – what can I do?

And since you're gone
from fact and life, if not
from dreams – what god,

what murmur-loving listener,
in room or cloud, am I
forever speaking to?

Will your words repeal
the river? Your hands
scoop out

the spring-
suggesting ground?
If not to bring him back,

cleansing the hair,
the blinking skin, then
to lower me down,

down to the black, half-
empty, sleepless place,
where I might join

my brother, and
the disembodied others,
in the lonely heaven.

The Killing March

(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

Each day permits
the old atrocities
again –

the necessary deaths,
the far-off scream
come near,

the itch of madness
spreading
on the hands and hair.

History is one
disaster, feeding
off another, or

what poems are made
to witness
and withstand.

You taught us that;
or someone did,
whose teaching stemmed

from what he saw,
from the hunger hushing
through him like a mist,

his head adrift
with grief, or sleep,
but not dead yet

on the killing march.
Against all murderous
decrees, and against

the unreturning cities
razed, the angel
drowning in the bricks,

the roads
where beggars roam
and drop, it's true:

the oak trees
still are breathing,
and the fist,

which ice and metal
hammered once,
can furl

to feel the winter
easing,
in a luff of rain.

So it is, poet,
in this barbaric language,
built from pain,

I imagine echoings
to be enough
to raise

your sightless eyes
and famine face,
and faith

in breath, a force
to conjure
youth again:

that place
of which, you say,
the music speaks

in mutter-tongues
and Morse. Love-poet,
eternal pastoralist,

in the din of one more
ending world,
I commemorate your corpse.

Sunlight

(William Orpen, 1925)

Try as I might
to follow
the slow geometries
of flesh – from
your dipping leg,
along your hip,
to the pink
perfection of your neck –
catching every detail,
possessing the always
fuller picture
of your loops and lines,
you continue
to elude the graph,
your face
a delicate elision,
your fingers dim
in their pertinent work,
your breasts
half-hidden
by light's transparent
easing into place,
sliding like an ill-
timed lover
through the window,
impolitely
turning up the colours
as it goes,
so each drape

and naked rumple
of the furniture
has come to match
the pallor
of the sun on skin,
and the flounce
of sweat-black hair
above your ear
grows clear,
as if suggesting
what shade and stocking
on your outstretched foot
conceal –
your shadow spaces,
lush still, and secreted,
for all the morning's
baring heat,
reminder, perhaps,
of the eye
that yearns for
what the skin remembers,
or that flame-
dark blaze, which
returns as water
to the window-pane
next day,
to fill each crack
and crinkle
that the night laid plain,
washing the room
with want again.

The Home

(i)

None of the instruments will do,
the keys are obsolete, the keypads

packed for dispatch, the unplugged house ajar
and gusting with the gap of reading lamps,

spare radios, the jazz collection disarrayed,
your TV coiled and crouching on the floor,

its day- and night-lights out for good.
Nothing restores to its proper calm:

the sub-text of small dissemblings, electric
needs, gives way to base-noise, hush.

And yet your hands persist against the sound,
somehow carrying a fruit-bowl towards me,

as if the fruit might simmer to the rim,
evaporate as breath, or the rim itself

dissimulate, its stone-deep sureties
unsettling form, to vanish before your eyes.

(ii)

No matter how orderly the world becomes,
which every minute hoarded in this house

has made chaotic, scatter-lifed, and true
to randomness, and no matter how quietly

your touch withdraws from book-sleeves,
cabinets, picture-frames, accedes to clearance

as the shelves dismantle anyway,
the windows start unlearning light,

right now I still am standing on the edge
of stillness – total, blameless, sweeping in –

and the basin in my arms, marked ‘Misc.’,
remains the core of all things here,

each sun-blotched photograph a heartbeat
this hesitation greatens to possess.

(iii)

Once the air remakes itself, and the walls resume
their wind-shunning, functional routines

without our bodies moving in-between, quietly
taking measure of resultant warmth, the life

retained by air or walls, and in the time taken
for shadows to perfect their shape in keyholes, hallway,

kitchen sink, without the bric-a-brac of breath
to intervene, will something same-like

have clarified in us, some play of tangibilities reset,
so the windows in our minds go glazed, the doorways

change their faces and the carpets shed their skins,
will the rhythm of floorboards come loose inside the sole,

or, as if memory depended on touch or proximation,
the house we left our lives in disentangle from the flesh,

and, forgotten, walk off without a whisper, float free?

Keepsake

The stone
I cannot part with –

I anchor it daily
on the deep sea-bed
of pages by my desk,
a weight for paper
and for poems,
heartbeat-heavy,
but light enough
to let the summer whisper
in the sheaf
when windows open,
or when I leave,
thereby keeping,
in its skull-dull, colourless,
life-perfecting way,
the rhythm
of this room adrift,

and your image, too,
pocketing sea-stones
years ago, your
white dress bright
on the eye-grey shore,
and you smiling there,
as if our wave's
unlovely sunder
would not come,
or as though the ocean

might remember touch,
the particles
be flung again
as longing
from your fists.

Like here,
where words
must delve until
the element resists,
and the vivid
breath rebuild itself
from the little that persists.

The Prisoner

(Photograph of Keith Douglas)

The photographer
has shot too soon,
so you'll stand

like this forever;
unappeased,
reticent,

your uniform heat-
creased, eyes widened
for the rain

that may fall daily there
to burn a thrumming life
to dust.

Finding you this way,
opened onto
on a page your diffidence defies,

the past becomes
what later
knowledge lacks,

the fact
before the story
of the fact, perhaps,

or the watch-strap
tightened
on a boyish wrist,

and the man
not checking it
as the camera strikes.

And yet, to look again,
there is space, too, behind
your fierce unreadiness

for softness
to unfold itself; enough
even for the poet

to stir in this image
of soldier, son, and lover still,
and show

which verve of air
and coolness out of earth
were yours that day,

and which our own
in the imprecise
perfections of the past

we wreak. Wanting you
so remembered, I feel
that I could wait

a thousand hours
for your gun-dark gaze
to clamber

out of the stifled light
you're wrapped inside,
and blink un-

photographed,
near with words,
on the heat-forgiven sand.

A fly enters the room
in which these wishes writhe,
lights on the hand

that would grip time's net
like this, and shake you
out of it, lithe with life.

For an instant, history
is an insect, caressing skin,
and what poetry there was

vanishes, in which you'd lift
your frantic cigarette
to mouth, and speak.

Learning from your reticence,
I know
that when this creature

escapes the brittle cage
of my attention
I may return

to press the living weight
of breath
impossibly through air

until your
almost poetic
poet self walks free.

Though, as I look
from your unmoving
portrait now,

it seems that being true
to that half-gentle, grim-
lipped glance you give,

I must note with care
this fly that squats
so curiously

on the slope
of my wrist –
yes, and try

to replicate
the immense, inhuman
watchfulness

in its tiny poise,
its eyes and fingers
beautifully unfearful

of what my bone-
dull hand conveys:
a stillness

total as your picture's is,
but riddled also
with heat

in the mind, the sun-
caught suddenness there,
and the blood-beats.

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Ciarán O'Rourke was born in 1991, and is based in Dublin. Ciarán previously published a pocket-pamphlet of poems as part of the Moth Edition series (2011), and received a bursary in literature from An Chomhairle Ealaíon/The Arts Council of Ireland in 2013. He was winner of the *Lena Maguire/Cúirt New Irish Writing Award 2009* and the *Westport Poetry Prize 2015 (In Memory of Dermot Healy)*.



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smithereens.press@gmail.com